

Islamists impose special ID cards for followers of indigenous faiths

Tuesday 17 April 2018, by [Coconuts Jakarta](#) (Date first published: 5 April 2018).

When Indonesia's Constitutional Court decided to allow followers of Indonesia's numerous indigenous faiths (collectively grouped under the term Aliran Kepercayaan) to declare their beliefs on their official state ID cards in November, it was hailed by many as an important step towards combating religious persecution in the country.

But some religious authorities, particularly the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), criticized the decision to allow the followers of aliran kepercayaan to state their belief in the mandatory religion column of their ID cards, saying that it elevated indigenous faiths to the same level as the six religions officially recognized by the Indonesian government (one MUI official said it "signifies the country's regression into the stone age").

MUI went so far as to demand that the government make special ID cards, unique to those who wished to declare that they followed aliran kepercayaan, that did not include the word agama (religion) so that nobody would make the mistake of thinking that an indigenous faith could possibly be considered on the same level as a proper religion.

Just yesterday, the government announced that it would be doing exactly what MUI had previously asked for, with Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin saying that followers of aliran kepercayaan would get a special ID card that was different from the adherents of Indonesia's officially recognized religions.

Specifically, it would not include the religion column on regular ID cards and instead would have a column called Kepercayaan (Faith). And instead of allowing citizens to declare their specific faith, all Kepercayaan columns will be filled in with the phrase "Kepercayaan Kepada Tuhan Yang Maha Esa" (Trust in God Almighty).

Lukman said the reason behind the special cards for indigenous faith followers was simply done for efficiency's sake since doing otherwise would require printing new ID cards for all Indonesian citizens that would include a Religion/Faith column.

But that, of course, is based on the acceptance of the argument made by MUI and other religious fundamentalists that an indigenous faith must be considered as a distinct and lower class of belief than a formal religion.

Another problem with the creation of special ID cards for followers of indigenous faiths is that it could be considered an act of discrimination in and of itself (based on the Constitutional Court's own ruling).

Forcing followers of minority beliefs to have their own distinct cards — making it explicit that they cannot be considered at the same level as followers of "official" religions — would only serve to perpetuate the kind of unconstitutional discrimination that the court ruling sought to end.

In explaining the court's decision, Judge Saldi Isra said the previous law restricted the religious rights of Indonesian citizens by only allowing them to officially declare their belief in religions recognized by the state.

"This is not in line with the spirit of the 1945 Constitution, which explicitly ensures that every citizen is free to embrace their own religion and beliefs and to worship according to their own religion and beliefs," Saldi said.

Followers of aliran kepercayaan filed the Constitutional Court petition that overturned the law as they had previously been forced to either falsely declare themselves a member of a religion they didn't follow or leave the religion column on their IDs blank, which often led to denial of government services and accusations of atheism (which remains officially illegal in Indonesia).

At any rate, Lukman said the new special ID cards should be available to the public in the next few months, probably after the 2018 regional elections. However, we wonder how many indigenous faith followers will choose to get them considering the kinds of discrimination it will open them up to.

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Originally published as "Government plans to make special ID cards specifically for followers of indigenous faiths"

<https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/government-plans-make-special-id-cards-specifically-followers-indigenous-faiths/>